THIRST

March 15, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-26

"Jesus said,...'he who believes in me shall never thirst'"
John 6:35 (RSV)

Jesus said one time, "The man or woman who believes in me will never thirst."

Many generations earlier an anonymous Hebrew poet wrote a hymn for use in the Temple...

> "As a hart longs
> for flowing streams,
> so longs my soul
> for thee, O God,
> My soul thirsts for God,
> for the living God."

Somewhere between the two: between that ancient confession - "My soul thirsts for God," and Jesus' bold promise - "the one who believes in me will never thirst" - is where most of us are this morning... which is to say, thirsty, perhaps secretly, but thirsty enough to be here and not somewhere else: but not quite certain about where the water is; not quite satisfied...

We know the power of water as a symbol, almost without being told... the waters of creation... the soft showers of springtime which call the first signs of life from the sleeping earth, the waters of our Lake which have been scaring us to death recently and which refresh, delight and recreate us and on occasion remind us of delicate balances and the place of human beings in the creation and of all those mammoth forces in the world beside which you and I feel rather insignificant... And the waters of birth... There is a new toy out for new babies. It looks like a routine Teddy Bear, but when you wind up the key on this bear's back, the music you hear is not Brahm's Lullaby, but something called "Womb Sounds," recorded sound with which the infant has become accustomed, and it is, unmistakably water sound... It's a special gift to hear the ocean, isn't it? You're really "at" the ocean I've always thought when you can actually hear it.

It's a reminder of something fundamental. And, of course, the water of baptism, placed gently on young foreheads, representing a love so deep and strong and refreshing that it is better acted out than explained. What a wonderfully sacramental moment last Sunday when the two year old, quietly surveying the surroundings during his baptism, pondering what had just happened to him and what was on his head, came to a conclusion and when I handed him back to his parents, announced to them and to you with clarity and with accuracy - "water."

It has always been a reminder of our humanity, of our dependence, of how fragile life is. In the literature of faith water becomes a symbol of humanity's need for our dependence on God's grace. During the wandering in the wilderness the people of Israel complain and doubt whenever water is not available. The existence of plentiful water in the Promised Land is a sign of God's love... "a good land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs..." [Deuteronomy 8:7]

"My soul thirsts for God" the Psalmist confessed.

"The man or woman who believes in me will never thirst" Jesus said.

Somewhere between those two points is where you and I are and it is where a woman found herself one hot mid-day at a well near the Samaritan city of Sychar. She is one of the most vivid and intriguing persons in the literature of the Bible. Her story is long and convoluted. It's difficult to follow all the way through. But it is a very important story because it is about issues that are contemporary. It is a story about outcasts, despised minorities, people oppressed by centuries of racial and religious prejudice. It is about the barriers people construct between themselves and others and how religion - instead of destroying barriers - is sometimes the reason they exist in the first place. It is also about guilt, isolation, alienation and the power of a love that cuts through all of that and calls forth a new life, a rebirth. But most of all, I think this story is about thirst.

Let's reconstruct it. Jesus and entourage were traveling from Judea in the South to Galilee in the North, through Samaria, in the middle. To the Romans a Semite was a Semite was a Semite and the family feud between Judeans and Samaritans was of no interest whatever. But it was real enough to the adversaries that a Jew would walk a long way to avoid going through Samaria. The trouble was 700 years old. It began when Jews in Samaria intermarried with Babylonian immigrants and adopted some of their customs. To "true believers" in Jerusalem, Samaritans were ethnically impure and theologically compromised. They hated each other. We continue to learn about the hatred and intolerance for which religion is frequently the handmaid, as Christians and Moslems square off in Beirut and Catholics and Protestants curse, bomb and shoot each other in the name of Jesus in the streets of Belfast.

The entourage of Jesus was in Samaria and stopped, at noon, at a well which was associated with Jacob. That well is about a mile and a half from the nearest town - and it is about 100 feet deep. The people with Jesus went to the town to buy food. A woman from the town showed up at the well to draw water. Now this is becoming a very interesting situation! If you

are a first century Jew or Samaritan, you're up on the edge of your seat. Why is the woman here? There's a well in town. Why has she walked a mile and a half in the heat of mid-day to draw water from a 100 foot well? There is a reason why she can't use the town well and it will soon emerge. In the meantime Jesus is about to do something terribly controversial, scandalous and revolutionary. Rabbis were forbidden to be with a woman in public, to talk to a woman, even to look at a woman. It simply was not done. A Rabbi was not allowed to greet his wife or sister or daughter in public. William Barclay suggested that an idiomatic phrase "bruised and bleeding Pharisees" referred to the ones who ostentatiously closed their eyes when a woman approached in public and consequently walked into a lot of walls and fell down a lot. Samaritan women particularly were not to be trusted.

What Jesus did next was as significant and revolutionary and volatile as Sojourner Truth walking up to the "Whites Only" fountain and drinking, Rosa Parks one day simply refusing to go to the back of the bus and sitting up front because her feet were tired, James Meredith walking up to the registrar at the University of Mississippi and signing on the dotted line, or Jane Doe invading the Club Dining Room at high noon - alone. Jesus asked the woman for a drink of water.

"It's no wonder," Dorothy Sayers once wrote, "that women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never seen a man like this man." [Are Women Human?, p. 47, in Letty Russell, Becoming Human, p. 25]. In one simple act Jesus broke through centuries of racism supported by religious bigotry. In the same act he magnificently corrected the great, great sin of religion which had systematically dehumanized one half of the human race.

The woman objects because of the cultural taboos. And there ensues a curious dialogue which is at once complicated but also light-hearted, almost playful. Are they conscious that when a man and woman meet at the well romance happens? Of course they are! It's Jacob's well. Jacob got his wife at a well. So did Isaac. So did Moses. Are they playing gently with the word "water," with "thirst?" He offers her "living water," literally, "running water." Does he know more about wells than Jacob, she wants to know. He corrects her. Living water is not running water. It is what she needs to live.

Now another theme is introduced. "Call your husband" Jesus tells her and reveals the fact that she had had five of them and the one she is living with, but not married to, is number six. The legal limit on husbands in Israel is three. Now we know what she was doing at this deep well, a mile and a half out of town at the hottest hour of the day. She couldn't use the town well. This woman lived so far outside the boundaries of propriety that she was not welcome where other people were. She was an outcast among outcasts. Respectable people acted as if she didn't exist. Their children snickered at her. Less refined people used hard words, in stage whispers loud enough for her to hear, to describe what she was.

This woman has three strikes against her, Yale theologian Letty Russell observes. "She is foreign and fallen and female." And in all that rather clinical content it's possible to forget the fact that she was a

deeply hurt, scarred human being. If you have in any way been a part of, or a party to, or a close observer of, the end of a relationship, a marriage, a "long loved love," you know how intensely painful it is. Multiply by five - and then double it because in addition to the personal part, the culture said "failure" and her religion said "sinner."

It's no wonder the Disciples are shocked when they return with the food and find Jesus and the woman talking. The story meanders on. The woman returns to the village. The people of the village are either impressed by what she tells them or the change they can already see in her, because now they come out to the well to see Jesus. Many of them believe. Jesus stays in their village two days.

The woman was reborn, born again - if you will, because she was willing to acknowledge her emptiness. She is a seeker. She struggles with belief. She is tentative, curious, and her struggle is, I would submit, like our own. Faith - belief in Jesus - doesn't always come easy for us. We wish it would. We wish we could generate the simple joyful trust we think we see in others. But it's a struggle for us, a process, a life dialogue.

The woman received living water because she could say "I'm thirsty." It was no problem for her. But that's exactly what religious people have difficulty saying. The Pharisees, for instance, are confidently and proudly and traditionally pious. They can't say "I'm thirsty." They can't confess need at all. Perhaps that's why Jesus chose to spend so much of his time with poor people, social outcasts, fishermen and prostitutes, tax collectors and this faded flower at the Samaritan well. He was most comfortable with people who could confess to something less than perfection, people who knew their humanity, people, that is to say, who knew about thirst.

There is something absolutely basic here. If our own spiritual pilgrimage is to go anywhere, we must learn how to acknowledge our thirst, to identify the dry places in our lives, the parched areas that need refreshment and living water.

And there is something desperately necessary here culturally, socially, politically. Historian Daniel Boorstin, in his wonderful book, The Discoverers, proposes that great strides in human history were always precipitated by an acknowledgment of ignorance. People who know the world is flat don't have to explore it. Lewis Thomas, research biologist, head of Sloan Kettering Cancer Clinic and perceptive author wrote,

> "The only solid piece of scientific truth
> about which I feel totally confident is that
> we are profoundly ignorant about nature.
> Indeed I regard this as the major discovery
> of the past one hundred years of biology.
> We are at last facing up to it. In earlier
> times we either pretended to understand how
> things worked or ignored the problem or
> simply made up stories to fill the gap.
> Now that we have begun exploring in earnest,

doing serious science, we are getting
glimpses of how huge the questions are,
and how far from being answered."
[The Medussa and the Snail, p. 58-59]

If our technology is to save us, or at least participate in our ability to sustain and enhance human life on our planet, it will be because that open-ended probing and that acknowledgment of thirst, ignorance, has been maintained and vigorously practiced. We need to be humble - modest before the unknown; - always thirsty for wisdom and understanding. How tragic that the voice of the Church, has so frequently been opposed to scientific inquiry. How tragic that religion seems so eager to make dogma out of opinion rather than risk discovering the truth. How unfortunate that the only voice people hear, because it's the only one that receives press attention, has again told the world that it knows the answers, knows all the truth and that reproductive technology, for instance, is immoral, regardless of its enormous potential for good.

There is something about our spirits that require more than the dailiness life provides. In fact, the evidence that there is spirit - or soul - about us - is the fact that the physical dailiness of life does not satisfy us... We are still thirsty... Think of how frequently that idea emerges in our best literature. Human beings need something which transcends their humanity, gives deeper meaning to their journey, something which calls out of them hope and aspiration and sacrifice. When we are deprived of that, something in us does die. When Willy Loman's dream crumbles in Death of a Salesman, there is nothing left but inevitability and suicide. Four teenagers locked themselves in a parked car with the engine running in New Jersey last Wednesday night. A school psychologist said "they thought they had nothing to live for." Two more teenagers in Alsip committed suicide the next day. Neither worked or attended school. They spent their days watching television together. On the windshield of the car they left a note containing lyrics to a rock song... "Yesterday seems as though it never existed - Death greets me warm. Now I will just say goodbye..."

My proposal and my growing conviction is that we are created with an empty space inside, a thirst so real that I am convinced our humanity, our life, depends on something like the living water Jesus offered that woman. I propose that our need for God has been created in us by God, that the reaching of the poet, artist, musician, for beauty and truth and passion is an expression of it. My proposal is that our sense of God's silence, God's remoteness, God's absence - is the thirst God put in us expressing itself. St. Augustine wrote for people who struggle with faith in every age, this woman certainly, you and I surely. "Thou hast made our hearts restless until they find their rest in thee."

The woman's most urgent need, most insistent thirst, was intensely personal. She tried to cover it over but didn't quite succeed. An outcast in a race that was already despised, a breaker of sacred custom and common morality, can you imagine how dismal her image of herself was? She couldn't have felt much except the self-loathing which she expressed in a series of temporary relationships, the last one of which didn't even pretend respectability. This woman who didn't matter to anybody and knew

it, was given her life back by a man, who in a few minutes, took her seriously, listened to her, talked with her, affirmed her personhood. Jesus reminded her of something she had forgotten - that she was a child of God.

We need the reminder. A distinguished social scientist (Rene Dubuos) noted recently that the danger to the race is not from the external threats which loom on the horizon, but from the dampening of the human spirit which no longer believes it can deal with its own problems.

We need a reminder occasionally that we are children of God, that we are not powerless to affect the global forces which impinge on our future.

What happens to that in us? Well sometimes the sense that we are children of God, loved by God, accepted by God - is contradicted by authority figures who tell us that we don't matter much. Sometimes parents do that to their own children. "How could you be so stupid?" is in actuality heard as a descriptive statement which a child adopts and then lives out. Sometimes teachers do it, and coaches and scout leaders and clergy.

Sometimes religion is the worst offender. It doesn't take much to convince some of us that we aren't worth much, that the guilt and inadequacy we feel is authentic, that the psychological joke about the therapist who tells the client that he doesn't have an inferiority complex - he's just inferior, in our case is true. Sometimes religion plays into our propensity to believe the worst about ourselves and to feel guilty about almost anything... about how we live or don't live: about what we really believe or what we find we really can't believe: about having so much or not having enough: whether we indulged our children or deprived them: about our sexuality and how we do or don't express it: about our appetite and our needs and our dearest hopes. And somewhere in that veritable maze of guilt and personal inadequacy we quite lose sight of the reason for raising the subject of religion in the first place; namely that there is a God whose nature is love, a God who accepts and forgives and who wants very much for us to be at home with ourselves and the world he has given us: that in the dry desert of our thirst for the living God - there is water to drink, living water.

Part of it, is to come to some well which reminds us of our thirst. Part of the pilgrimage of the spirit, the destination of which is newness of life, is the courage to say "I'm thirsty." That is what I invite you to do this morning... Whoever you are...wherever you happen to be on your own pilgrimage of faith, in whatever way seems appropriate...to acknowledge your thirst.

I invite you to identify and to name the places where you feel shut-out...places where your feelings about yourself could use the healing touch of someone who loves you without condition.

Perhaps you don't measure up to someone's expectations of you - (your family, parents, spouse, friends, employers, teacher). Perhaps you don't live up to your own expectations and what you do live with is the feeling of inadequacy and guilt which results... Perhaps like this woman you are

standing somewhere outside the boundaries of convention... Perhaps you too feel cut-off from the community... Perhaps you live with the numbing daily pain of a failed relationship. Perhaps, like this woman, you have concluded that you don't matter.

I invite you, this morning, very simply to say... "I'm thirsty...my soul thirsts...for the living God..."

The woman came to the well in the dry heat of mid-day because she had nowhere else to go. She found living water in the graceful acceptance of a man who took her seriously. She found living water as that man restored in her her own sense that she was a child of God. She was born again, given her life anew, by the love of one who was truly her Savior.

That is the Gospel. That is Good News for all who know their own thirst. Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to you, O God, for the restlessness
in our souls,
Thanks be to you, O Creator, for making us
incomplete without you.
Thanks be to you, O God of Love, for the
thirst within us.
Thanks and praise to you, Almighty God,
for living water, for love that has
reached out to us, for grace and
forgiveness and affirmation in Jesus
Christ our Lord. Amen.